DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 602 FL 025 647

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TITLE Beyond the L2 Metaphor: Towards a Mutually Transformative Model of ESL/WAC Collaboration.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association (1998).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Needs; *English for Academic Purposes; *English for Special Purposes; *English (Second Language); Graduate Study; Higher Education; Intellectual Disciplines; Interdisciplinary Approach; Interprofessional Relationship; Program Design; Second Language Programs; Undergraduate Study; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

A metaphor sometimes used in teaching discipline-based academic writing is that the experience of learning to write in various academic contexts is like learning a new language (L2). This approach is critically examined here, and its implications for "writing across the curriculum" (WAC) programs at the college level are discussed. It is argued that uncritical use of the metaphor can mask the difficulties of learning a second language and lead to marginalization of second-language writers in WAC programs and in the professional discourse of composition studies in general. In addition, it is proposed that specialists in both WAC and English-as-a-Second-Language have much to learn from each other. Mutually beneficial ways of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration between the two fields are considered. (Contains 14 references.) (MSE)

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ED 426 602

Beyond the L2 Metaphor: Towards a Mutually Transformative Model of ESL/WAC Collaboration

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Learning to write in the disciplines is often difficult because students tend to be unfamiliar with discipline-specific writing practices—such as linguistic and discourse conventions, audience expectations as well as dominant cultural and epistemological assumptions. To many undergraduate and graduate students, the experience of learning to write in various academic contexts is akin to learning a new language. To characterize this experience, the analogy of "writing in the disciplines as a second language" has been invoked by some writing across the curriculum (WAC) specialists.

We want to argue, however, that the second-language metaphor—or, for short, the L2 metaphor—needs to be approached critically because writing in the disciplines, after all, is not the same as learning a second language. Our first goal in this paper, then, is to critically examine the "WID as a second language" metaphor and consider its implications for WAC programs. Specifically, we want to argue for a critical approach to the use of this metaphor because, as we will discuss, its broad and uncritical use can mask the complexity of second-language learning and can lead to the marginalization of second-language writers in WAC programs as well as in the professional discourse of composition studies in general. By critiquing the use of the L2 metaphor in composition studies, however, we do not mean to suggest that second-language studies have nothing to offer WAC specialists; on the contrary, we believe that specialists in both WAC and English as a second language (ESL) have much to learn from one another. The second goal of this paper is to consider mutually beneficial ways of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration between WAC and ESL specialists.

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The Uses of the L2 Metaphor in Composition Studies

In general, the L2 metaphor is useful because it can encourage specialists in composition studies to learn from second-language studies. As Tony Silva, Ilona Leki and Joan Carson recently argued in "Broadening the Perspective of Mainstream Composition Studies," insights from second-language acquisition and ESL writing pedagogy "could help composition studies develop a more global and inclusive view of writing" (402). In *Understanding ESL Writers,* Leki also wrote that "in certain ways theories about and insights into second-language acquisition may be useful for all writing teachers, since writing researchers, theorists, and teachers have pointed out that even in one's native language, learning to write is something like learning a second language" (10).

A prime example of the use of the L2 metaphor by a WAC specialist can be found in "A Stranger in Strange Lands," Lucille Parkinson McCarthy's classic study of a college student writing in various disciplinary classrooms. In this study, McCarthy characterized the experience of Dave, a white, middle-class college student, by comparing it to the process of learning a second language—or second languages. She wrote:

> As I followed Dave from one classroom writing situation to another, I came to see him, as he made his journey from one discipline to another, as a stranger in strange lands. In each new class Dave believed that the writing he was doing was totally unlike anything he had ever done before. This metaphor of a newcomer in a foreign country proved to be a powerful way of looking at Dave's behaviors as he worked to use the new languages in unfamiliar academic territories. (234)

The L2 metaphor gives WAC specialists a way of explaining to teachers across disciplines—or, in McCarthy's words, "native speakers" of discipline-specific language—"just how foreign and difficult their language is for student newcomers" (262). Indeed, the L2 metaphor seems to provide a useful way of capturing student writers' experience in ways that no other metaphor can.

McCarthy was by no means the only one to notice the usefulness of the L2 metaphor in composition studies. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the L2 metaphor became popular among teachers and researchers of basic writing, including Mina P. Shaughnessy. In *Erros and Expectations*, a ground breaking study of basic writing, Shaughnessy invoked the metaphor of academic English as a second language, referring to basic writers learning to write in college as "strangers in academia" (3). She saw an analogical relationship between the two groups of students because basic writers, "however different their linguistic backgrounds, are clearly colliding with many of the same stubborn contours of formal English . . . that are also troublesome to students learning English as a second language" (92). For this reason, she sought in her work to apply "ESL approaches in the teaching of English to natives" of the United States ("Basic" 162). For instance, she tried to improve writing teachers' attitudes toward basic writers by adapting "the view a teacher is more likely to have toward a foreign student learning English" (*Errors* 121). She continued:

> [The ESL student's] errors reflect upon his linguistic situation, not upon his educability; he is granted by his teacher the capability of mastering English but is expected in the course of doing so to make errors in English; and certain errors, characteristic errors for natives of his language who are acquiring English as a

> second language, are tolerated far into and even beyond the period of formal instruction simply because they must be rubbed off by time. (121)

Shaughnessy's work was influential in pointing out the relevance of second-language research and pedagogy to writing instruction for basic writers, as a number of studies that explored this issue in the late 1970s and the 1980s cited *Errors and Expectations* as a point of departure for their effort.

In *Teaching Writing as a Second Language,* for instance, Alice S. Horning extended Shaughnessy's use of the L2 metaphor in her effort to develop a theory of writing acquisition by applying insights from second-language acquisition research. She contended that "basic writers develop writing skills and achieve proficiency in the same way that other adults develop second-language skills, principally because, for basic writers, academic, formal, written English is a new and distinct linguistic system." She explained:

> They are, moreover, newcomers to the academic community of a college or university, and while their native langauge may or may not be some dialect of English, formal written English is quite foreign to them. They must master both the languge and culture of academia, and they face many of the same intellectual and psychological challenges that confront other second-language learners. (2)[1]

Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer also attempted to apply error analysis in ESL to basic writing research. In "Error Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," they argued that "a consideration of the issues involved in the evolution of error-analysis in ESL can contribute, both theoretically and methodologically, to [composition specialists'] study of the errors students

make in written composition." Specifically, they argued that composition specialists could use "a sophisticated terminology for discussing error" developed by second-language researchers to "promote the type of interdisciplinary work that we see as crucial to the advancement of composition theory and research" (248).

Problematizing the L2 Metaphor

Despite Kroll and Schafer's argument for interdisciplinary cooperation, however, the relationship between composition and second-language specialists has thus far been limited, for the most part, to the occasional borrowing of theoretical and practical insights. These borrowing practices are problematic, however, because they often construct and represent second-language scholarship in limited ways and may diminish the potential for further collaboration and mutual growth. For instance, the application of ESL pedagogy in composition studies has often focused on the problem of errors, giving the impression that the field of second-language writing is concerned almost exclusively with students' errors, whereas the study of errors is only a small part of the growing body of second-language writing scholarship.

Furthermore, the use of the L2 metaphor can also mask the complexity of second-language learning. As McCarthy acknowledged, students who share with their teachers "ethnic and class backgrounds" are "actually in a privileged position in terms of [their] potential for success" in figuring out the teachers' tacit expectations (262). And if writing in various disciplines is more difficult for students from different ethnic and class backgrounds, it is even more so for second-language writers who do not even share the linguistic background—a point that is often forgotten in the age of "institutionalized" critique based on race, class and gender.

Yet, when the L2 metaphor is used as a way of explaining the difficulty of learning to write in the disciplines for native English speakers, there is no language left to explain the experience of second language writers, who literally have to learn the second language in addition to learning various disciplinary "languages." In other words, the use of the L2 metaphor, which seems to encourage interdisciplinary cooperation between WAC and ESL specialists, could also be contributing to the marginalization of second-language issues in WAC programs. It could also be affecting the ability of ESL specialists to effectively communicate the needs of second-language writers with instructors across the disciplines.

The view of interdisciplinary relationship underlying the current use of the L2 metaphor seems to be what Matsuda has called the "division of labor model" ("Situating" 104).[2] In this model, the two "disciplines" are considered to be independent and discrete, each taking on a different responsibility: ESL specialists are expected to work only with ESL students—which is more or less accurate—and writing specialists, including WAC specialists, are to be concerned with non-ESL students only. The obvious problem with this division is that writing specialists in composition studies remain unprepared to work with ESL students who, after finishing ESL courses, are also enrolled in writing programs at all levels. Such borrowing of insights from second-language studies without considering the needs and interests of second-language writers or specialists is ultimately an inadequate appropriation.

Another problem with this model is epistemological. That is, the borrowing practices that we have discussed are based on the assumption that the interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge can take place without affecting the knowledge being borrowed or the dynamics of knowledge in the two disciplines. Such a view of the interdisciplinary relationship seems epistemologically

naive and its consequences to second-language students and specialists ethically problematic. In the next section, then, we propose what we call a mutually transformative model of interdisciplinary collaboration between second-language studies and writing across the curriculum, which can help to alleviate the problem of ESL/WAC relationship.

Towards a Mutually Transformative Model of ESL/WAC Collaboration

The mutually transformative model is a view of an interdisciplinary interaction that recognizes the dynamic and fluctuating nature of knowledge and fields. This view of the interdisciplinary relationship sees both the knowledge being borrowed and the fields that are involved to be affected by the interaction. In the context of WAC/ESL relationship, this model helps us see that WAC can borrow from ESL but it also affects the disciplinary and institutional practices of both WAC and ESL in ways that may never have been anticipated or wanted. Traditionally, as we have shown, this change has been focusing on altering WAC practices to better serve the needs of native English speakers in WAC programs without considering how second-language students or specialists are affected in relation to WAC practices.

The mutually transformative model suggests that WAC specialists, in incorporating second-language perspectives, need to recognize how second-language students and specialists are affected by this inevitable relationship—inevitable not only because the L2 metaphor provides a way of incorporating second-language perspectives in WAC practices but also because ESL students are often subjected to WAC practices. The model can also encourage WAC specialists to realize the need to develop WAC programs in ways that reflect this awareness.

What, then, do WAC specialists need to do to move beyond the problematic interdisciplinary relationship that is reflected in the current use of the L2 metaphor as we have outlined? First, WAC specialists need to pay more attention to the presence and needs of second-language writers in WAC programs. It has generally been assumed that ESL programs exist to provide remedial instruction to second-language writers for a certain period of time so that they can function effectively in other academic environments—including the writing intensive courses in their majors. However, second-language "problems" do not somehow disappear after a few semesters of instruction. For this reason, many second-language writers will continue to require support throughout their academic career and beyond. To meet the needs of these students effectively, WAC specialists need to recognize their presence and to learn from second-language specialists in addressing the needs of those students.

Second, in engaging in interdisciplinary interaction with second-language studies—or, for that matter, any other disciplines—WAC specialists need to pay more attention to the implications of such interaction on many levels, including disciplinary, programmatic, and individual. To this end, WAC specialists, before engaging in any interdisciplinary interaction, might develop a disciplinary equivalent of an environmental-impact statement, which reflects a thorough consideration of the consequences of such interaction—just as engineers do before they begin projects that are potentially hazardous to the surroundings. For example, if a WAC program is to incorporate an ESL component, it should be done in ways that are informed by a careful examination of the structures and goals of ESL programs as well as WAC programs. Another example, at the disciplinary level, is to critically reflect on interdisciplinary borrowing of

knowledge by asking questions such as: What are we gaining? At what (and whose) cost? What are we overlooking? How can we make it beneficial for everyone involved?

However, assessing the impact of WAC specialists' actions on second-language issues is difficult because the interests and concerns of ESL specialists are not always apparent to WAC specialists. For this reason, WAC specialists should make an effort to move from the interdisciplinary borrowing approach to a more participatory approach. In other words, any such interaction should start with a dialogue between specialists from both fields. Opening up WAC programs to diverse and innovative perspectives is not new; in fact, it is virtually axiomatic (Maimon; Walvoord, "Getting Started"). WAC specialists can profitably apply this philosophy to the context of WAC/ESL relationship as well.

There are a number of ways that ESL/WAC collaboration might be initiated. For instance, ESL specialists can be invited to participate in designing and developing WAC programs that are sensitive to the needs of second-language students. At institutions where WAC programs are administered by committee, ESL specialists may be invited to join the committee to represent the needs and interests of ESL specialists and students. At institutions where WAC programs are administered by individual directors, ESL specialists may be called upon as outside consultants. Conversely, WAC specialists can also make efforts to participate in the development of English for academic purposes programs—a unit within the ESL program that aims at preparing ESL students for language and writing demands across the disciplines.

Collaboration is also important in incorporating an ESL component into existing WAC programs or vice versa. The involvement of specialists from both WAC and ESL programs in coordinating such development is crucial so that duplicating services can be avoided. When

programs offer services with similar goals, they often risk being consolidated by higher level administration in order to conserve limited resources—often without consulting those who are involved in the programs.

WAC and ESL specialists can also work together to create joint programs within writing centers or instructional development centers. Some instructional development centers provide funding for initiatives to develop unique and innovative programs. An advantage of this approach is that it will allow for the development of innovative programs without threatening the existing institutional structure. As McLeod pointed out, creating a new interdisciplinary program with a unique structure may make it "vulnerable to the administrative ax" ("WAC" 68). To achieve collaboration without losing the institutional status that both programs worked hard to establish, WAC and ESL programs should attempt to do so without abandoning the existing program structures. By working together in the service of improving teaching and learning, WAC and ESL could also conserve resources by sharing hard-to-come-by grant funding and aid one another in securing increased institutional status (McLeod "WAC").

At the disciplinary level, more dialogue between WAC and ESL specialists need to take place at conferences and symposia. The WAC section of MMLA provides a good starting point, but this type of collaboration needs to be extended to the national level. In that vein, we see our own collaboration as a starting point for a movement toward more mutually transformative interaction between WAC and ESL specialists.

Conclusion

Donna LeCourt suggests that faculty across the disciplines are open to making their discourses more accessible to students who have been traditionally excluded from academia. ESL students, as Vivian Zamel points out, are one of those groups of students whose presence is increasingly felt. By collaborating with ESL specialists in incorporating second-language issues into WAC practices, WAC specialists can play a role in further democratizing discourses across the curriculum.

Notes

[1] Horning's discussion of second language acquisition research is somewhat dated. For a more up-to-date review of second language acquisition research and its implications for composition studies, see Silva, Leki and Carson.

[2] For a history of the creation of the disciplinary division of labor between composition studies and second language studies, see Matsuda ("Composition").

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